



Six-year-old Courtney T., who has Down syndrome, gives a talk in Primary with the help of her brother Justin. The Church handbook teaches that “lessons, talks, and teaching methods should be adapted to meet each person’s needs.”

How Do I Help This Child?

By Danyelle Ferguson

Do you work with Primary children who have cognitive disabilities? Here are some ideas for teaching them.

Many Primary teachers and leaders have questions about how to serve a child with cognitive disabilities, such as autism, Down syndrome, or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They might ask: How can I teach this child? Should she be in the same classroom with others her age? Can he participate in sharing time or activities?

As the mother of a son with autism and as a Primary teacher of children with cognitive disabilities, I've learned a lot about meeting the needs of these children. The following principles are just some of what I've learned. Hopefully, they will be helpful to you as you reach out to serve and include all children in your ward or branch Primary.

Serve as Jesus Did

Our Savior showed us how to serve others by tailoring His message and actions to fit individual needs.¹ For instance, when He visited the Nephites, He gathered their little children to Him and “took [them], *one by one*, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them” (3 Nephi



Author Danyelle Ferguson with her son Isaac, who has autism.

17:21; emphasis added). Angels then “encircled those little ones” with heavenly fire and “did minister unto them” (3 Nephi 17:24).

We share in the Lord’s ministry as we teach all children. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles reminds us: “Those of us who have been entrusted with precious children have been given a sacred, noble stewardship, for we are the ones God has appointed to encircle today’s children with love and the fire of faith and an understanding of who they are.”² As we fulfill our responsibility to help children with disabilities, the Lord will help us individualize our service and teaching to meet their needs.

To better understand these needs, Primary teachers and leaders could meet with the child and his parents, which is a good time for the teacher to begin befriending the child. Often the best place to get acquainted is in his home, where he is comfortable and more likely to connect with new people.

Become Educated and Work Together

Teachers and leaders should take time to learn about the child’s disability. A great place to start is the Church website lds.org/disability (available in several languages), where they can read overviews about specific disabilities, learn teaching tips, and find additional resources.

Emily S. and her four-year-old son, Landon, who has pervasive developmental disorder, talk with Primary president Debra Maloof about things Landon likes and successful strategies for teaching him. Serving a child with disabilities can best happen when the child and his or her parents and leaders work together in a spirit of unity and cooperation.



After exploring the website, teachers and leaders can meet again with the child's parents to share ideas, discuss concerns, and set goals. Parents can share information about their child that will help teachers be successful, such as insights on how the child communicates, which activities she enjoys and which to avoid, and how to encourage appropriate behavior. Working with parents is vital in establishing the unity, cooperation, and ongoing dialogue necessary to best serve a child with disabilities.

Teachers and leaders should also consult with their priesthood leaders as they develop ways to serve the child. When our son was first diagnosed with autism, we didn't know how well he was going to transition from nursery to a Primary class with his peers. A sister in our ward who was a schoolteacher approached our bishop and Primary president and offered to be our son's aide. The Primary president, a member of the bishopric, my husband, and I met with her, and she talked to us about how to help our son. We set goals and created a plan to help him understand the routine of Primary. We often needed to tweak the plan over the following three years, but as he learned to understand what was happening around him, he became more interested in interacting with his peers and participating in the lessons. This sister's understanding and commitment built the foundation on which our son continues to stand. Her love and friendship taught him that he's a beloved child of God.

Because of that, he continues to see church as somewhere he can go to be himself and be loved.

Build Friendship and Trust

As teachers we can "follow the Savior's example of offering hope, understanding, and love to those who have disabilities."³ As we show genuine interest in children with disabilities, our friendship with them will grow.

Children with cognitive disabilities may communicate differently than others. When teachers tap into a child's individual communication style, they are able to build trust and friendship and become more effective instructors.

Here are two ways to improve communication:

- **Put your face at the child's level.**⁴ When adults do this, the child feels less intimidated and more included. It also helps children who have a difficult time focusing in a group setting. The teacher or aide can capture the child's attention and share a sentence or two about the lesson periodically during the class.
- **Find out the child's interests.** Children feel valued when others show interest in things they love. Children with disabilities often become attached to certain things, such as a particular toy, animal, or game. A teacher can ask the child to talk about his interests and refer to that interest in the lesson. Even if the child does not speak, the teacher can still talk about what interests him.

Integrate

In most cases, a child with cognitive disabilities should be assigned to her regular Primary class. This is important for both the child and her peers. Integration helps her learn appropriate social interaction and church conduct and prepares her for the transition to youth classes. For peers, being in class together provides opportunities for service and for experiencing the unique insights children with disabilities can provide. Spending time together also encourages friendships—an important part of feeling included and wanted at church.

When our son was preschool age, one little girl often sat beside him in Primary. She created cards and pictures for him if he missed class. Our son could not tell us her name, but he would take her hand and call her “my friend.” Their friendship gave her opportunities to serve and helped him be happy about attending church.

To facilitate friendships, a parent or teacher may choose to introduce the child to her peers on the first day of class and talk about her as a person—sharing her talents, skills, and favorite activities. Then they can talk about the disability so the peers understand the child’s needs and any behaviors that may seem unusual to them. Often, if parents and Church leaders are open in explaining these things, her peers will be more comfortable befriending her.

Consider contacting experts who can help Primary teachers set up a plan so the child can be more fully involved. Sometimes the child’s schoolteacher will be willing to meet with the parents and Primary leaders to teach them which techniques are successful with the child at school. The teacher may even be willing to attend church to give hands-on examples.



Being integrated in a Primary class helps both a child with cognitive disabilities and his or her peers. Here Audrey S. reads the scriptures with Isaac.

In a few cases, exceptions can be made so the child is taught separately, or other adaptations can be made. The Primary section of Serving in the Church on LDS.org provides further guidance on this.⁵

Provide Support in the Classroom

It can be challenging to meet the needs of every child in *any* Primary class. When a child with disabilities is part of that group, a co-teacher or assistant may need to be called. Co-teachers take turns teaching the lesson and assisting the child, or an assistant may be called to work specifically

with the child with a disability. Primary workers should coordinate lesson schedules, develop a system of communication, and discuss how they will handle different circumstances that may arise. As always, prayer, communication, and planning are crucial to having a successful partnership and providing an edifying teaching experience.

When calling a co-teacher or assistant, consider that the parents work with their child and deal with the challenges that come with raising a child with disabilities 24 hours a day. They may need an opportunity to attend their Sunday classes or to be involved in other callings; this short break may help them renew their energy and prepare to meet the challenges of the upcoming week.

Adapt Lesson Plans

The Church handbook teaches that “leaders and teachers should include members with disabilities in meetings, classes, and activities as fully as possible. Lessons, talks, and teaching methods should be adapted to meet each person’s needs.”⁶ Teaching lessons in a way that meets each class member’s needs requires prayer, creativity, and effort.

Brooklyn C. (third child from left), age four, who has autism, loves singing time in Primary; her parents say she has always responded well to music, and the tactile aspect of finger play adds additional interest for Brooklyn and other children.



Begin by finding out how the child learns best. The Leader and Teacher Resources link on [lds.org/disability](https://www.lds.org/disability) contains information about adapting lessons. Additional suggestions are listed under each disability heading. The Primary section of Serving in the Church on [LDS.org](https://www.lds.org) is another excellent resource. Adaptations made for a child with disabilities will be helpful to the other children as well. These approaches have worked for me:

- **Visual:** Many children are visual learners, meaning that pictures or objects help them understand ideas. The co-teacher or assistant can sit beside the child with disabilities and show him drawings or pictures throughout the lesson to illustrate what's being taught. If the child likes to draw, he may like having blank paper to share with his assistant. Together they can draw items mentioned in the lesson.
- **Auditory:** Children who learn by listening enjoy hearing stories. They also love it when the teacher uses his voice to animate the story—whispering, gasping in surprise, or using a slightly faster voice in the exciting parts. Teachers may need to simplify and shorten the stories from the lesson so the child with a disability will understand and stay interested. Consider telling the story, then taking the

principles from the story and applying them to a real-life situation or a story or event the child is familiar with.

- **Tactile:** Children who learn through touch enjoy having objects to hold and feel. If a story in the lesson takes place outdoors, the teacher could bring a smooth rock, twig, or stuffed animal to show as the story is told and then pass the object around so everyone can take a turn holding and examining it. Crafts and coloring pages are other helpful tangible items.

Participate in Sharing Time and Other Activities

Participation is important for children with disabilities. Be creative in finding ways to involve them in the scripture, prayer, and sharing time talk rotations. If a child has difficulty speaking, for example, he may be able to use pictures to communicate. Or some children may like the idea of standing at the podium but are too shy or unwilling to talk. In this case, let the child stand at the podium and be excited about being there while the parent helps him by being the voice for the assignment. He may help by holding the pictures for his talk or by being an example of when to fold arms for the prayer.

Here are a few other activities and the types of adaptations you might consider:

- **Primary sacrament meeting presentation.** A child with a disability may need extra support and flexibility because the sacrament meeting presentation is not a part of her normal routine. Involving her in several practice sessions will help her adjust to the changes. It's a good idea to have the child sit next to her assistant so he can prompt her before songs or her speaking assignment. If she is easily overwhelmed by noise or the visual stimulation that comes when facing a congregation, reserve a side pew near the front for her and her assistant. This way she can color, look at picture books, or leave for hall breaks without distracting other children. This also allows her to go up front to say her part or sing, then return to the bench to calm down. Another child may be fine with sitting on the stand but could need some fidget toys, such as two or three paper clips or a smooth pebble to hold on her lap. This is helpful for children who have difficulty paying attention in large groups.
- **Sharing time.** If a child's class is given an assignment to participate in sharing time, be sure the child with a disability is included in a way that is comfortable for him. If the class is putting on a skit, he may have a short part or even no speaking part, but simply being dressed up with other children will help him feel included. It's important for him to share experiences with his peers to develop relationships.
- **Extra programs.** If the Primary is participating in an activity such as a ward or branch talent show or Christmas

program and the child with disabilities has problems with loud noises or crowded rooms, allow her class to go first in the program. Then her parents have the option to take her home before she is overwhelmed.

Reap the Blessings

Thanks to my son with autism, I have gained a new perspective on what it means to be a child of God. I have learned that Heavenly Father truly knows and loves each of us individually. He knows our needs and gives parents and leaders promptings through the Holy Ghost to care for and bless the lives of our families and the children we serve. I have also gained a keen appreciation and love for our son's Primary teachers and Church leaders who have taken the time to become friends with him. They are wonderful examples of the Savior's love.

Teaching a child with cognitive disabilities requires extra time and effort and at times includes moments of frustration. But through prayer, inspiration, and reliance on the Lord, we can find success as we fulfill our stewardships to help these special children. ■

For more information on this topic, see Handbook 2: Administering the Church (2010), 11.8.6; 21.1.26.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Matthew 8:1–17; 9:1–13, 18–38.
2. M. Russell Ballard, in “Behold Your Little Ones,” *Tambuli*, Oct. 1994, 40; “Great Shall Be the Peace of Thy Children,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1994, 60.
3. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (2010), 21.1.26.
4. See *Teaching, No Greater Call* (1999), 71.
5. See “Teaching All Children, Including Those with Disabilities,” [lds.org/pa/display/0,17884,5727-1,00.html](https://www.lds.org/pa/display/0,17884,5727-1,00.html).
6. *Handbook 2*, 21.1.26.



GUIDELINES FROM CHURCH HANDBOOKS

The Church handbooks contain excellent information for teachers and leaders as they serve those with disabilities. The “Members with Disabilities” (21.1.26) section of *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* provides guidance and addresses many common questions. The auxiliary chapters include additional instruction. *Handbook 1* contains direction for priesthood leaders, including guidance on baptism. Look under “disabilities” in the index for a complete listing.